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SIPDIS

NEA FOR DAS TAMARA WITTES
NEA/PI FOR TIM ANDREWS
EMBASSY ABU DHABI FOR RALPH FALZONE
NEA/ARP FOR ANDREW MACDONALD
USAID FOR CHRIS KISCO

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KMPI](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [EAID](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: MEPI'S LOCAL GRANTS PROGRAM: A YEMEN SUCCESS STORY

REF: A. 07 SANAA 1220

[B](#). 05 SANAA 310

[C](#). 03 SANAA 1559

[D](#). 03 SANAA 166

[1](#). Summary. With more than 7000 registered Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), but little to no indigenous funding for its nascent civil society, Yemen has benefited greatly from the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)'s local grants program. The local grants program has made a particular impact in supporting emerging CSOs in Yemen and in creating linkages between already existent organizations. Yemeni MEPI alumni, from both local grants and exchange programs, continue to act as like-minded reformists across society. Although CSOs have benefited from an active civil society, operating in Yemen is becoming increasingly repressive for CSOs. Despite efforts by the ROYG to control the NGO sector by introducing a new, more restrictive NGO law, civil society in Yemen remains lively and will resist being controlled by the central government. Post recommends the continuation and preferably the increase of MEPI local grants funding to Yemen in the future. End Summary.

FUNDED BY THE US, MADE IN YEMEN

[2](#). With more than 7000 registered Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), but little to no indigenous funding for its nascent civil society, Yemen has benefited greatly from the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)'s local grants program. Since the advent of the MEPI program in Yemen in 2003, dozens of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have received small grants. MEPI has funded projects in Yemen through local grants in all of the four original "pillars") political, economic, democracy, and women. Yemeni MEPI projects have focused primarily on promoting women's political participation, legislative reform, human rights awareness, and economic development. (Comment: The success of the MEPI local grants program in Yemen is particularly notable given the larger context: As the poorest country in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemeni CSOs and the Yemenis that run them are hungry for funding. In the first six months of 2009, the MEPI Committee at Embassy Sana'a received over sixty applications for local grants. Of the sixty, approximately twenty to thirty were qualified for funding, while the program could fund only ten to twenty. End Comment.) The local grants program functions as a rapid reaction force for change. For example, when the Department expressed an interest in finding and funding an NGO to work on the issue of early childhood marriage in September 2009, the MEPI Committee was able to identify an appropriate NGO and solicit a grant application in a few of weeks.

[3](#). The local grants program has made a particular impact in supporting emerging CSOs in Yemen and in creating linkages

between already existent organizations. Hafez Al-Bukari, President of the Yemen Polling Center, said that MEPI was the first donor organization to support his Center and that USG grants were intrinsic to its ability to build the organization to international standards. Dr. Arwa Yahya Al-Deram, Executive Director of SOUL, a CSO that focuses on the health, education, and social development of women and children, echoed Bukari, saying that MEPI helped in both the establishment and development of her CSO. A 2005 week-long visit from Laura Schultz, then MEPI Political Pillar Officer, was invaluable to SOUL in formulating its strategic plan. The MEPI program brought existing CSOs into contact with each other, often making the initial connections between major players in civil society in terms of operation. In the words of Ezzadin Al-Ashbahi, General Director of the Human Rights Information and Training Center (HRITC), "the best thing that MEPI did was (to use the Forum for the Future) to create coalitions of CSOs" both within countries like Yemen and throughout the region.

14. Yemeni MEPI alumni, from both local grants and exchange programs, continue to act as like-minded reformists across society. They have formed an active network, continuing to nurture bonds made during and after their participation in MEPI programs. With support from the America-Mideast Educational and Training Services, Inc. (AMIDEAST) and from a steering committee based out of Sanaa, MEPI alumni organize independent programs emphasizing entrepreneurship and women's empowerment, both key reform issues in Yemen. MEPI alumni often become leaders in civil society. Upon her return to Yemen, former Leader for Democracy Fellow Intisar Aladhi became Secretary General of the All Girls Society for

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Development, the implementer of a MEPI local grants project, and an active reformer within the civil society community.

ROYG CRACKING DOWN ON CIVIL SOCIETY?

15. Although CSOs have benefited from an active civil society, they are finding it increasingly difficult to operate in Yemen. The ROYG is attempting to introduce and impose a new, more restrictive NGO law, which will make it more difficult for CSOs to receive funding and register as NGOs. According to the Democracy School Chairman Jamal Abdullah Al-Shami, the new law will make it harder to obtain and use foreign funding. Today, there is no stigmatization in receiving USG funding. In fact, at least one NGO leader, the Democracy School's Shami, has said that it adds to their prestige and credibility. Still, there are signs that the ROYG is gradually making it more difficult for organizations to operate within Yemen. Shami estimated that 30 percent of CSOs are operating without a license and remain unable to register or renew their registration. Meanwhile, the ROYG is pressuring donors to require licensing when making their decisions to award funding. (Note: One of the most established and reputable human rights NGOs in Yemen, HOOD, has been operating for 11 years without a license due to the ROYG's refusal to issue a license. End Note.) Enforcing the current NGO law, the ROYG has also shut down 1500 "fake" NGOs, ostensibly for operating as front organizations) in some cases for terrorist finance and money laundering activities. While the ROYG claims that it is targeting specific NGOs due to their connections with nefarious activities, Shami alleges that the ROYG is also using the law to target some NGOs for political reasons.

COMMENT

16. Despite efforts by the ROYG to control the NGO sector by introducing a new, more restrictive NGO law, Yemeni civil society has potential, and will resist being controlled by the central government as long as funding is available. The MEPI local grants program, for its part, has assisted in

solidifying the development of civil society. Civil society leaders remain in touch with and responsive to people at the grassroots level. As a result, civil society leaders and their respective CSOs informally act as both an "alternative society" and an "alternative governance structure," providing space for both expression and action, however limited. Post recommends the continuation and preferably the increase of MEPI local grants funding to Yemen in the future. End Comment.
BRYAN